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# Is Judaism Democratic? Reflections from Theory and Practice Throughout the Ages

Leonard J. Greenspoon

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Is Judaism Democratic?  
Reflections from Theory and  
Practice Throughout the Ages

Studies in Jewish Civilization  
Volume 29

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and the Schwalb Center  
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# Is Judaism Democratic? Reflections from Theory and Practice Throughout the Ages

Studies in Jewish Civilization  
Volume 29

Editor:  
Leonard J. Greenspoon

The Klutznick Chair in Jewish Civilization

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## Acknowledgments

The 29th Annual Symposium on Jewish Civilization took place on Sunday, October 30, and Monday, October 31, 2016, in Omaha, Nebraska. The title of the symposium, from which this volume also takes its name, is “Is Judaism Democratic? Reflections from Theory and Practice Throughout the Ages.” All of the papers collected here, with the exception of the study by Alan Mittleman, were delivered at the symposium itself.

The academic sponsors of this symposium represent three major educational institutions in Nebraska: Creighton University (the Klutznick Chair in Jewish Civilization, the Kripke Center for the Study of Religion and Society), the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (the Harris Center for Judaic Studies), and the University of Nebraska at Omaha (the Schwalb Center for Israel and Jewish Studies).

In large measure, the symposium owes its success to two groups of dedicated and talented individuals. First are my academic colleagues: Dr. Ronald Simkins (Creighton), Dr. Jean Cahan (UNL), and Drs. Moshe Gershovitz and Curtis Hutt (UNO). Their generosity, individually and collectively, has been exemplary.

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As many readers of this volume know well, the road from oral presentation to written publication is filled with obstacles. Our path has been inestimably smoothed over through our relationship with the Purdue University Press. For almost a decade, we have enjoyed the professional and personable staff of the press, under the previous directors Charles Watkinson and Peter Froehlich, and now under co-interim directors Katherine Purple and Bryan Shaffer. They have made us feel comfortable in every way, and we look forward to many more years of association with them.

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## Editor's Introduction

Over the course of several millennia, humans have devised a considerable number and variety of ways to govern themselves. This is apparent from even a partial listing of forms of government (here in alphabetical order): anarchy, aristocracy, autocracy, democracy, meritocracy, monarchy, nomocracy, oligarchy, plutocracy, technocracy, and theocracy. Although the forms themselves derive from different time periods and social conditions, their names are almost always Greek: the ending “-cracy” from the Greek verb meaning “to gain or have control over” and “-archy” from the root “to be ruler over.”

For many, especially in the West, democracy (however defined at its contours) has held a special place for philosophers and practitioners alike. The essays in this volume explore democracy within Judaism, from its beginnings (the Hebrew Bible) until today (especially, as the concept is being played out in the State of Israel). As with democracy in general, so it is in Judaism: questions arise at both theoretical (or theological) and practical levels.

For me, as volume editor and as its first reader, the essays collected here hold many surprises. For example, I had not previously detected the intimations of democracy in certain biblical texts. Nor had I fully appreciated the multilayered interrelations between the classical rabbis and the practice of democracy.

At the same time, I found reinforcement for my understanding that the current turmoil over the “Jewish” versus the “democratic” nature of the State of Israel was only a part, albeit a vital part, of a long-standing and vigorously argued debate among Jewish thinkers and politicians. And I was also encouraged to discover that many of the foundational ideas and ideals of the United States and other modern governments do indeed draw their distinctive features from the Jewish tradition.

As always in our volumes, we are nonpartisan. This is not to say, however, that our authors lack passion or precision. Every scholar in this volume demonstrates how much they care about their respective topics by their concern for accuracy and their recognition of relevancy in the presentation and evaluation of material.

The first two chapters place considerable emphasis on the Hebrew Bible: Joshua I. Weinstein, Herzl Institute, Jerusalem, “A Biblical Alternative to Greek Political Philosophy and the Limits of Liberal Democracy”; and Baruch Alster, Givat Washington College, Israel, “The ‘Will of the People’ in Anti-monarchic Biblical Texts.”

In Weinstein's analysis, which is chapter 1, classical Jewish sources from the Hebrew Bible forward highlight three central aims of the Jewish ideal: leaving "the house of bondage," inheriting a land of "milk and honey," and maintaining a covenant of divine intimacy. In this context, no system of governance can be viewed as successful if it loses its sense of dependence on the divine as established in Deuteronomy 8:11–18.

For Alster in chapter 2, the key biblical passage is Deuteronomy 17, which is critical of the excesses of any human king and demonstrates trust in the people to uphold the covenant with God. In his view, this is in keeping with a major theme of the book of Deuteronomy, which sees the public as responsible for its leadership.

David Brodsky, Brooklyn College, and Simcha Fishbane, Touro College and University System, take the opportunity to analyze classical rabbinic texts. Chapter 3 constitutes Brodsky's presentation, which is titled "The Democratic Principle Underlying Jewish Law: Moving Beyond Whether It Is So to How and Why It Is So." Here he establishes that the Mishnah lays out the principle that Jewish law is governed by the rules of democracy: when disputes arise, the majority rules. But, Brodsky continues, democracy is not the ultimate goal, but serves to promote other ends that he has discerned.

Fishbane's paper is chapter 4: "*Mipnei Darkhei Shalom*: The Promotion of Harmonious Relationships in the Mishnah's Social Order." For Fishbane, Judaism is not a democratic religion per se, but it does include many aspects that advocate democratic traditions, such as the principle of *mipnei darkei shalom*. The application of this principle creates an environment of peaceful and mutual respect between all people.

Another two essays feature the works of some of the most distinguished modern Jewish philosophers: Samuel Hayim Brody, University of Kansas, "Theocracy as Monarchy and Anarchy"; and Joseph Isaac Lifshitz, Shalem College, Jerusalem, "Jewish Democracy: From Medieval Community to Modern State."

In chapter 5, Brody points to Martin Buber as a religious Zionist who sought out the roots for radical political novelties in traditional Jewish texts like the Hebrew Bible. Buber focused on the premonarchic era of Israel, during which God ruled Israel directly. But, as Brody demonstrates, the resultant system resembled something close to anarchy—and this represented the original "constitution" of Judaism.

Lifshitz begins chapter 6 by looking back at the medieval political concept of the Jews, which differs considerably from the modern democratic social

contract. Within this framework, he presents the political theory of modern Jewish philosophers like Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas as a possibility for modern Jewish democracy.

The American Jewish experience is at the center of the next two chapters. The first of these is chapter 7, titled "Linking 'Egypt with Texas': Emma Lazarus's Jewish Vision of American Democracy," by Joan Latchaw and David J. Peterson, both professors at UNO. As Latchaw and Peterson point out, Lazarus's "The New Colossus" continues to beckon millions to the shores of America. At the same time, the bulk of her poetry has been largely forgotten. By closely examining some of this poetry, they show how Lazarus portrays America and American democracy as enabling Jews to flourish: democratic America offers both refuge and homeland.

Lenn E. Goodman, Vanderbilt University, was keynoter for the symposium. He provides a significant analysis of "Judaism and Democracy" in chapter 8. He concludes that many of the key elements of the democratic ideal are rooted in the biblical text and rabbinic tradition. Among these are consent of the governed, the presumption of innocence, the exclusion of self-incrimination from court proceedings, and a commitment to the sanctity of life and the inestimable preciousness of the unique human individual.

The three chapters that follow, Lawrence H. Schiffman, New York University, Ori Z. Soltes, Georgetown University, and Alan Mittleman, Jewish Theological Seminary, offer broad views encompassing many different time periods and approaches. Schiffman's presentation, chapter 9, is "Monarchy and Polity: Systems of Government in Jewish Tradition." In this essay, Schiffman brings forth a number of texts that offer parallel lines of debate concerning the political organization of the Jewish people. Both texts and practical experience come together to guarantee that by modern times democracy would be assumed by the Jewish community to be the ideal system and model.

Chapter 10 contains analysis by Ori Z. Soltes, titled "Democracy, Judaism, Israel, Art, and Demagoguery." To the presentations by other presenters, Soltes adds considerations of art. As he illustrates, art has affirmed and challenged, defined and dissented from Israel's political-spiritual self-conception: it has offered a consummate expression of democratic principles.

The study by Alan Mittleman, titled "Dignity and Democracy: Defending the Principle of the Sanctity of Human Life," constitutes chapter 11. Throughout his essay he offers a robust defense of dignity. He concludes with this observation: if dignity is fundamental to a decent democracy, biblical conviction about indefeasible human value may well be necessary. In fact,

Mittleman asserts, without the continuing cultural power of “Jerusalem,” the claims of reason might ring hollow.

No symposium on Judaism and democracy would be complete without some reference to the modern State of Israel. For the authors of the last two chapters, the State of Israel is central:

Chapter 12, titled “‘The Will of the People’ or ‘The Will of the Rabbis’—Democracy and the Rabbis’ Authority,” is by Shlomo Abramovich (Bar Ilan University and visiting scholar, Beth Israel Synagogue, Omaha). In it, he looks with special interest at Orthodox communities of the twentieth century, where rabbis have very wide authority and their followers obey their decisions absolutely. He then explores differing explanations and diverse motives for such absolute obedience to the rabbis. As a result, Abramovich observes that a community led through obedience to rabbis should not necessarily be considered nondemocratic.

In her paper (chapter 13), “The Jewish State and the End of Democratic Judaism,” Meirav Jones (University of Pennsylvania) acknowledges that different democratic forms have characterized Judaism in Eastern and Western Europe from medieval to modern times. She then contends that the presence of a Jewish state—even a democratic Jewish state—has changed the nature of Jewish life since 1948 such that Judaism is no longer in the hands of its constituents.

Leonard J. Greenspoon

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